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**University Prep follows growing trend of single-sex schools**

Tiffany Lankes • Staff writer • October 3, 2010

Fourteen-year-old Jamarr Crayon's biggest concern starting at the new University Preparatory Charter School for Young Men is where he will find a prom date. Surveying his classmates the first weeks of class, the seventh-grader gathered his social situation could be a challenge. It's a minor tradeoff for the benefits he hopes to gain at Rochester's first public school for young men, which opened in August with about 160 students.

Once virtually unheard of in the public system, single-sex schools such as University Prep are becoming more common as educators look for new ways to help students learn and to bridge the achievement gap between white and minority students. In 1996, there were just three single-sex public schools in the [United States](http://www.democratandchronicle.com/article/20101003/NEWS01/10030358/University-Prep-follows-growing-trend-of-single-sex-schools&referrer=NEWSFRONTCAROUSEL" \t "_blank). Now, more than 540 public schools have at least one single-sex classroom, and about 100 cater exclusively to one gender. The growth follows a wave of research that suggests boys and girls learn differently, and that educators can tap into those differences to help students do better academically. The model is becoming popular in urban school districts such as Rochester, which have struggled for years to help students — particularly African-American boys who tend to lag behind their female classmates — do better.

"Across the country, especially in urban settings, girls outperform boys on state assessments and more often girls ultimately graduate from high school," said University Prep principal Joe Munno. "I said, 'let's target the group where we can have the most impact.'" But despite some newfound interest, single-sex public education still has skeptics. Leading critics, including the [American Civil Liberties Union](http://www.democratandchronicle.com/article/20101003/NEWS01/10030358/University-Prep-follows-growing-trend-of-single-sex-schools&referrer=NEWSFRONTCAROUSEL" \t "_blank) and the National Organization for Women, say that single-sex schools reinforce gender stereotypes and can pigeonhole boys and girls into certain roles. They say there is more to good teaching than separating students based on gender and caution that the model could offer more problems than solutions. "What concerns us is these schools are being established very quickly and without any means of [quality](http://www.democratandchronicle.com/article/20101003/NEWS01/10030358/University-Prep-follows-growing-trend-of-single-sex-schools&referrer=NEWSFRONTCAROUSEL" \t "_blank) control," said Pedro Noguera, a professor at New York University who has studied single-sex education in urban school districts. "We have to keep reminding people if we bring a lot of boys with a lot of challenges together in the same environment, you still have a lot of boys with a lot of challenges you have to deal with."

Still, in a city that has struggled to help its students make gains, educators will be closely watching University Prep to see whether it offers an answer. In the classrooms of the school, housed in a converted old mansion at 180 Raines Park that was previously home to Nazareth Hall school, boys sit in neatly pressed shirts and ties working in small groups on their assignments. All of the desks are pushed together in clusters to facilitate teamwork. The uniforms aim to give the students, mostly African-American boys whose parents chose this over city schools, a sense of pride and identity.

Students start each morning in homeroom talking with a group of classmates — Munno calls them crews — and a teacher about any trouble they are having. At the end of the day, they spend an hour with the same group working on homework, reviewing the day's lessons or participating in extracurricular activities. Munno hopes all of these things will foster a close-knit, familial atmosphere in which students feel supported by their classmates and teachers. That kind of environment, youth advocates say, is key to steering young men away from the city's culture of street violence that has claimed three African-American school-aged boys' lives since the year started. "It's more than just receiving an education; it's about providing young men with options," said the Rev. Marlowe Washington, head of the Rochester Literacy Movement. "It's about finding ways to get young black men the values and skills they need to succeed in a culture that so often works against them."

While single-sex classes are fairly new to public schools, one group of educators has centuries of experience catering to the male learning style. The Jesuits opened their first schools in the 1500s to prepare future members of the order but over time opened their doors to young men from the general public. Just like at University Prep, boys at McQuaid Jesuit High School in Brighton come to school in dress shirts and ties, and their teachers try to reinforce a culture of brotherhood and teamwork. The school, which costs roughly $10,000 a year to attend, is one of two Jesuit schools in upstate New York and draws students from all over the region. Another area Catholic school, Our Lady of Mercy High School, serves female students.

McQuaid teachers have embraced the school's single-sex origins and are constantly looking for ways to build on that foundation with strategies tailored to their students' way of learning.

"You really do try to play to the male proclivities," said teacher Tracey Bors.

During one recent lesson, Bors led the students in her creative writing class through a guided imagery exercise to help them craft a personal essay. The lesson aimed to both maximize her students' strengths — boys tend to be auditory learners — while at the same time challenging them to overcome their weaknesses. Since some research shows that boys tend to be left-brained, linear thinkers, she hopes the exercise will encourage them to be more free and creative with their writing.

"If you know the beast, then you can channel its strengths and challenge its weaknesses," she said.

The techniques Bors uses in her class draw from a growing body of brain research about how boys and girls learn. Some researchers report that parts of the brain develop at different rates in boys and girls, giving one sex or the other advantages in certain areas. For example, girls tend to develop language and fine motor skills before their male classmates, whereas boys are quicker to develop the part of their brains that influences the senses.

Researchers also say brain chemistry plays a role in how the genders perform in the classroom. Boys have more testosterone, which makes them more active and physical, whereas a predominance of estrogen means many girls tend to work better independently and are more introspective.

The theory is that if educators can tap into those different styles and target their teaching, then their students will do better.

"What's best for Emily is not necessarily what's best for Melissa, and what's best for Melissa is not necessarily best for Johnny," said Leonard Sax, director of the National Association for Single-Sex Public Education. "Every child is different and parents deserve a chance to choose what's best for their child." Not to mention that single-sex classes cut back on the distraction members of the opposite sex may pose.

As this research emerged, the federal government started opening the door for public schools to experiment with single-sex classrooms. While there were some single-sex public schools in the United States, at the turn of the last century, most of them closed after Title IX mandated in 1972 that schools offer equal access to all students — regardless of gender.

But then in 2001, as the nation looked for ways to close the achievement gap between white and minority students, the federal No Child Left Behind law set aside money for schools to try innovative learning programs, including single-sex classrooms.

Several years later, the U.S. Department of Education laid down some ground rules for how educators could start gender-specific programs, prompting schools all over the country to start separating the sexes.

Some are reporting strong results. A four-year study conducted by Stetson University in Florida revealed that students in a single-sex classroom in Pasco County outperformed their peers on the state standardized test. The two classes were the same size and had the same demographics. But about 85 percent of boys in the single-sex class were deemed proficient on the state test, compared to 55 percent in the co-ed class.

Rochester school officials saw similar results when they started a single-sex classroom at Wilson Foundation middle school several years ago. The school started using gender-based classrooms during its summer session in 2006 and found that students participated more and did not act out as much. So it started separating the sexes during the regular school year. Students are now separated by gender for all of their core classes, an environment that seems to make students feel more comfortable and helps teachers foster stronger relationships with them.

"For our kids, that relationship piece is critical," said Deasure Matthew, a city school district administrator who was principal at Wilson when it started single-sex classrooms.

Sure enough, a 2009 study conducted by a group of researchers in New York City showed that all-boys schools help boost self-esteem and self-confidence, particularly among African-American and Latino boys, which in turn can lead to better school performance.

"We know that historically, urban children, both boys and girls, are not afforded the same opportunity to enroll in single-sex schools, and there is a lot of research showing that children do better in that environment," said Melissa Jarvis-Cedeno, principal of the new Albany Leadership Charter High School for Girls. "We saw a need for this."

Munno saw that same need here in Rochester, where the graduation rate for African-American male students trails about 11 percentage points behind that of their white classmates.

Munno hopes that taking some of those high-risk students out of the city schools and placing them in a small, rigorous academic setting will help them thrive.

At the core of his model is an academic program Munno believes will appeal to his male students' sense of adventure and knack for hands-on learning. Expeditionary Learning, which is also used in several of the city's schools, teaches students the state standards through field trips, projects and experiments.

Munno also is trying to create a professional environment to help his students thrive. Along with the uniform, Munno plans to take them to visit two college campuses every year so that they have plenty of options by the time they graduate. The school will always stay small, with about 75 students at each grade level. It opened this year with seventh and eighth grades and plans to add more levels.

Yet despite some anecdotal evidence that single-sex programs such as Munno's work, skeptics still question their effectiveness.

Some critics say that separating the sexes and pandering to specific traits reinforce gender stereotypes, including that men should be more aggressive and women more passive. They also question the credibility of the research that boys and girls learn differently and say that some supporters of single-sex education cherry-pick studies to back up their argument.

"We don't really know what the link is between gender and academic success, if there is a link," said Noguera, the professor at New York University. "The idea that boys learn differently than girls is just nonsense. They're basing this on anecdotal evidence and that's really dangerous."

St. John's University law professor Rosemary Salomone helped write the guidelines for public schools to create single-sex classrooms because she believed those programs could foster strong self-esteem and self-confidence in young women. But now she fears that some schools are using the model to reinforce negative stereotypes, without any academic benefit.

"I'm deeply concerned when I see some of the stories coming out about single-sex classrooms and what they're teaching," Salomone said. "If we're teaching students that certain sexes are supposed to act a certain way, then how will they ever see each other in their adult lives? For old feminists like me, this really is a throwback."

But for parents like Christol Wright, whose son struggled for years in the city schools, those criticisms make little difference.

When she heard an advertisement for University Prep on the radio, she thought it might provide a renewed sense of hope for her son, 11-year-old Zahr, who has learning disabilities. Even in the first few weeks of school, she has noticed a difference in his attitude. He wakes up every morning excited to get dressed in his uniform and go to class. While she had given up hope he would ever finish school, she now looks forward to his graduation.

"It's sad to say, but for a parent who has struggled to get their child educated in a good environment, this is really something," she said. "I've been through so much when it comes to his education. I kind of feel like this school saved me in some form or another."

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